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UNH's Institute on Disability Is Awarded \$580,000 Grant to Improve Higher Education for Students with Disabilities

By [Sharon Keeler](#)
UNH News Bureau

DURHAM, N.H. -- The Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire has been awarded a three-year, \$580,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Education. The grant, the first of its kind from the Office of Post Secondary Education, will enable the institute to pilot a program aimed at improving higher education for students with disabilities.

The demonstration project, titled "Equity and Excellence in Higher Education," focuses on developing, implementing and evaluating a model of professional development and technical assistance for faculty and administrators. It will offer ongoing education in teaching methods that are effective with diverse learners, including those with disabilities.

According to project coordinator Cate Weir, the percentage of students with disabilities attending post secondary education has steadily risen from 2.6 percent in 1978 to 19 percent in 1996. This enrollment, however, remains 50 percent lower than enrollment among students without disabilities. Research also suggests that students with disabilities experience difficulty staying and completing their programs of study due to lack of appropriate academic support and services.

"For many college students with disabilities, the way courses are taught can be a significant barrier," says Weir. "For students with learning, sensory and attentional disabilities, traditional instructional practices based on lectures and auditory methods often impede both the ability to acquire and retain information, as well as the ability to communicate what one knows. Our project is focused on inclusive curriculum design that provides good strategies for all students who may not thrive in traditional lecture and paper test environments."

The process to be used in this project blends teaching methods from general and special education that have proven effective in high schools. Research conducted by project coordinator Cheryl Jorgensen found that,

when teachers used this curriculum design process, students with disabilities were successfully included in general education classes and achieved higher academic outcomes.

"This process involves teachers defining what the essential questions of the course are and determining what outcome is expected from the students," Weir explains. "There's a focus on cooperative groups and hands-on learning that recognizes the different ways in which people learn and communicate what they know."

Two post secondary institutions, UNH and the New Hampshire Technical Institute, will be the model demonstration sites for the first half of the project. Two other sites will be added for the second half.

Each school will identify a project team comprised of college students and graduates who experience disabilities, faculty from various academic and technical areas, disability support coordinators and key administrators. Training will be provided through site-based and web-based workshops, a statewide training series, a training institute in collaboration with the Lilly New England Conference on College and University Teaching, and a fall symposium sponsored by the Pedagogy Committee for the Technical and Community College System of New Hampshire.

In addition to the demonstration of the model at UNH and NHTI, the project is committed to offering statewide training on the proposed methods of curriculum and instruction. This outreach will take place through statewide training, a project web site, faculty-to-faculty information via an email list-serve, curriculum tip sheets and manual, newsletters and journal articles. This information will be disseminated to student advocacy groups, faculty and support providers and professional organizations.

For more information on the Equity and Excellence in Higher Education project, contact Weir at 603-228-2084.

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